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Energy park concept moves forward

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TAMPA - An alternative energy park that would create electricity and fuel from solar panels, household refuse and algae is expected to spring up on an old mining site within the next few years.

The Hillsborough County Commission moved it forward last week approving, in concept, two comprehensive plan amendments that would allow such a use on the old Sydney Mine property. The land sits between South Dover Road and Turkey Creek Road, south of State Road 60.

The plan amendments, expected to be finally approved in August, would create a new land use designation called Energy Industrial Park. Another would extend the urban service boundary to include the 3,081 acres for the project. That way, the developer can hook up to county water and sewer.

The concept for the alternative energy park got pushback from a few who believe the developer, Imperium, has not released enough details. Others, however, say it's the best plan to date for the old phosphate mine and far superior to the last proposal, which called for construction of more than 2,500 homes.

The county Planning Commission staff called the Energy Park plan consistent with its sustainable growth management strategy and said it is also consistent with goals to create jobs and alternative energy.

Nancy O'Connor, who lives just south of the old mine, opposes the plan. She doesn't want the county to extend the urban service area into her rural community. The new designation, she said, allows too many high-density uses, like labs, offices and classrooms.

Other neighbors, including community activist George Niemann, support the plan.

"I'm usually opposed to things," Niemann said.

Still, he has concerns about whether the developer will be required to install all the necessary infrastructure, so the plan will not affect neighbors.

"People are thinking this may not be such a bad use for this property," Niemann said. He urged the developer to set up a citizen advisory panel to work on the proposal.

Terry Flott, executive director of United Citizens Action Network, said the citizen advisory panel is key. Imperium president Kyle Mowitz said he is willing to work with the neighbors.

"That area is ideal for this type of operation," County Commissioner Mark Sharpe said. "I do agree there needs to be more information available, a Web site and a way people can ask questions."

Commissioners voted 5-0 in a straw pole to approve the comp plan amendments.

The plan amendments are scheduled to come back before the commission Aug. 5 for final approval.

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